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ABSTRACT

Six propositions express central and crucial functions of language. Knowledge of these concepts constitutes language awareness, and they should therefore be used as a basis for designing language awareness curricula. They are that: (1) each individual has the ability to produce an unlimited number of different utterances from the limited vocabulary and rules he has at any given time; (2) the rules of language are as interesting and meaningful when they are broken as when they are followed; (3) language is at the same time relatively stable and in the process of continuous change; (4) language varies elaborately with social factors; (5) people's language is as individual as the people are, but it can be used by different people to accomplish many things; and (6) utterances have two levels of interpretation: the content itself, and its relationship to what has gone before and what is to come, to the receiver's position, to how it will be received, and so on. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN SIX EASY LESSONS

J. M. Sinclair

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LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN SIX EASY LESSONS

J M Sinclair

Language Awareness is very much a "grass roots" movement, taking its lead from the work of pioneering schools, and this has led to a wealth of good ideas and variety of approaches which a more centrally-devised policy could not match. This diversity fits well with the essential vagueness of "Language Awareness", which I have grumbled about on a previous occasion. But a Working Party is bound to exert pressure to tidy things, to define, to abstract, to categorise. It is the natural human seeking of a consensus.

I believe that the creative untidiness of the actual content of Language Awareness courses is in fact unrelated to the fuzziness of the cover-term. They have different origins, and it is a case of a useful concept happily meeting up with a spontaneous school-based perception of a need. This paper hopes to add a little stiffening to a fluid situation, because for many people it is too fluid. Language Awareness courses arise in different schools for different reasons, are devised by different groups and are applied at different stages to different pupils in pursuit of different objectives. There is nothing in the day-to-day teaching that one can perceive as common to all. Also, some of the teachers involved confess that they are at sea when it comes to devising or justifying a syllabus, and teachers who are eager to set up such a course can get little authoritative guidance.

The current pattern of Language Awareness courses highlights a problem that has thwarted many initiatives in language education in the post-war period. There is a gross shortage of time and expertise. Language Awareness courses, in the main, are squeezed into an overfull timetable and are able to secure only a paltry proportion of the attention of a class or school. The priorities of teacher training and the bureaucratic divisions in language education from the DES outward, make it most unlikely that Language Awareness teachers have had adequate preparation, or can feel any security beyond personal conscientiousness.

This unfortunate current situation, when compared with the average run of syllabus proposals, exposes a credibility gap. If one is asked to specify course content in Language, Language Studies, Linguistics, etc. either for pupils or in teacher education, it is difficult to avoid being comprehensive, thorough and detailed. Anything less would seem to be irresponsible. The result is something that will not fit into the time available and/or is beyond the competence of the staff available. I am as guilty of making unrealistic suggestions as anyone else, and hereby repent. I hope

that the reception of this paper will not require further repentance.

Hence the title. The great lumbering organisation which educates our children can only cope with modest proposals, and gentle nudges. Instead of thinking of content as coverage, I should like to identify a few important and distinctive features of language which might with profit be offered to pupils in a Language Awareness course. If there are as few as six lessons, something would be accomplished by raising the six points that are outlined below. If there are 12 lessons, so much the better - and so on, for the syllabus is infinitely extendable.

This enterprise has a reputable pedigree, in for example the attempt of R A Hudson to reach consensus.[1] He produced a classified set of 81 statements about language with which most of those working in language teaching would agree; unfortunately, it would probably require at least 81 lessons to put them across. At a more abstract level, the attempt, originated by Hockett, to set out the defining characteristics of language provides a smaller, more manageable menu. As revised and extended by Lyons[2] it offers an interesting set of propositions that could form an exciting Language Awareness course. In essence the claim is that any activity that conforms to all of the criteria is equivalent to a natural human language, and anything that fails on one or more of the criteria is not. It was an interesting defensive response to the revelations in the fifties and sixties that various other mammals - apes and dolphins principally - either seemed to use or could be trained to use a communication system which had a disturbing similarity to language, which had hitherto been regarded as a reliable defining characteristic of humankind.

I commend these criteria as an excellent basis for a Language Awareness course, but fear that the abstract nature of the concepts would take some considerable class time to tease out and exemplify. Also the conceptual steps involved would require very sophisticated management. What is needed is something more direct and concrete, which can be put across in vivid terms in a short time, which does not depend on a heavy input of knowledge, and which can relate directly and spontaneously to the state of language awareness of the average class. There are six propositions which seem to me to express central and crucial features of language. Any pupil who had

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1. Brookes A, and R Hudson, "Do Linguistics have anything to say to teachers?" in R. Carter (ed.) Linguistics and the Teacher, (RKP 1982).

2. Lyons J, Semantics, vol. 1, p.70, (Cambridge, 1977).

recognised these six would in my view be linguistically aware. Here is a short account of each of them.

1. Productivity

Language is apparently a limited resource for any individual at any point in time. In principle, we could make a list of the words that a person knows and the structural rules that he/she has command of. Yet each individual has the ability to produce an unlimited number of different utterances. The two points should be easy to establish in the classroom with any age of child, and a wide range of devices for extending the set of sentences will be thought out. Perhaps the general mechanism of recursion, or cyclical repetition, will be identified, but perhaps not.

2. Creativity

During exploration of the first point, the question of poetic licence may well arise, and that can be used to examine some features of the literary language. The initial point to be made is that the rules of language are just as interesting and meaningful when you break them as when you follow them. Learners will not need much encouragement to break a variety of rules, and can then be invited to find meaningful contexts for the results. It is likely that this activity will highlight the bizarre side of linguistic creativity as a matter of course by everyone. Because it is so normal, natural and widespread, it is likely that some difficulty will be experienced in latching on to the point, especially since it is suppressed in most language teaching materials. But once grasped, the pervasive creativity of language will provide a powerful tool for exploration. For example, it is natural and everyday to use metaphor to overcome a problem in description.

3. Stability and change

In establishing the second point, it may well be noticed that the rules of a language are not terribly clear-cut or evenly applied. That is a good way into the notion of variation, about which two points are to be made. The first contrasts the relative stability of a language at any point in time with the fact that it is continuously in a state of change. Historical awareness is notoriously difficult to initiate in young children, and language offers one of the easiest ways in, for example through the daily neologisms on the media. Quite important questions can arise from the perception that a society normally includes several generations of speakers.

4. Social variation

The second point about variety will come up in sorting out the

historical side - this is the way language varies elaborately with social factors. Again, from the observation that language is an inexact system arises the question of what other meaning is given in side-effects. Of all the issues in this syllabus, this is the most obvious and easy to teach, with stimulus material easy to get. It also provides a good starting point for two further explorations - the variety of languages, and social signalling of a paralinguistic or non-linguistic nature.

5. How to do things with language

Some syllabuses concern themselves exclusively with the fourth point, but this one presses on, picking up the observations in 3 and 4 about individual variation. The fact that no two people are the same is basic to the study of language as interaction; some theories of language are only suitable for clones. The theme of this part of the syllabus is how to get things done, using language, while being aware that it may not be interpreted in exactly the way in which it is intended. Again, it leads to lively, high-activity teaching and good clean fun.

6. The two-layered code

The final point should arise from the preceding by the observation that people in conversations keep checking back on each other. The language of the classroom itself gives examples every few seconds. This is developed into a study of language about language - how we are constantly checking, evaluating, summarising, labelling, scene-setting, etc. Language is seen as a two-layered code rather than as a single stream of speech or writing. The content of an utterance - what message it contains, which in principle could be phrased differently - is seen as taking a particular form because of other important information that must be given in the same structure - how it relates to what has gone before and what is to come, how it may relate to the hearer/reader's position, how it is to be taken, what is the expected evaluation, etc. Because this discoursal information is not as obvious or as well-organised as the conventional content, the learner's attention has to be drawn to it. Some teachers may have difficulty explaining its meaning and force, especially in respect of a foreign language. But since this aspect of language is at the basis of effective use, it is essential to have it even in a minimal syllabus.

A course which brings home these six points will be a lively and effective course. It will certainly give a heightened awareness of language, and will contribute to the linguistic development of learners, whatever their stage. These central features of language would be very difficult to teach by exposition, but easy to teach by discovery. Every speaker of a language actually operates with them, so by delving into their own skills they will readily understand, and become aware of their own language, and that of others.